DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 488 CS 504 577

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TITLE On Distinguishing Competence from Performance in Studies of Human Communication.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (69th, Washington, DC, November 10-13, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Research; *Communication Skills; *Linguistic Theory; Research Methodology; Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS Audience Response; *Theory Development

ABSTRACT

Given that overt linguistic behavior is not an adequate or primary datum for linguistic theory and that linguistic theory cannot directly account for overt linguistic behavior, human language can be seen as an abstract system that relates (graphic or phonetic) surface representations of sentences and underlying grammatical forms and semantic interpretations, not as a collection of behaviors or even a set of rules and conventions for producing and understanding such behaviors. Linguistic theory is about such abstract systems. However, given that speakers and hearers must know such a system to speak and understand the language at all, a linguistic theory is functionally an account of the competence to undertake linguistic behavior. The ability to work out messages that have goal-relevant constraining effects depends minimally on the following: (a) the accurate projection of the interpretive consequences of a contemplated message; (b) the accurate interpretation of messages by the audience, especially those indicative of their traits and dispositions, in order to predict their interpretations and responses; and (c) a cognitive distinction between intrinsically valued messages and instrumentally valued messages, and the subordination of the former to the latter when there is a conflict. (CRH)

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ED246488

ON DISTINGUISHING COMPETENCE FROM PERFORMANCE IN STUDIES OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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The study of communicative competence is aimed at specifying the full set of cognitions and cognitive skills needed to effectively communicate:

> The end result of verbal development is a child who . . . not only knows the grammatical rules of its language but also speaking rules or some portion of them. Its conduct shows some knowledge of expectations as to when speech is obligatory, when proscribed, when informative as an act by virtue of being optional. It shows some knowledge of a system of speaking, a system characterized partly by the fact that not all theoretically possible combinations of such various factors of speech events as speakers and addressors, receivers and addressees, channels, settings, codes and subcodes, topics, message_forms can appropriately co_occur. It shows some knowledge of the hierarchy of functions which may characterize speech generally, or speech events particularly, in its society. And such knowledge is necessary, for of course it is not enough for the child to be able to produce any grammatical utterance. It would have to remain speechless if it could not connect utterances with situations. (Hymes, 1964: 110)

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There does not seem to be much controversy about what our concern is under the rubric of "communicative competence," and this enables a healthy concentration on troublesome details: e.g., about how and where to draw a line between prescriptions for effective communication and descriptions and theories of communicative competence; about whether communicating competently is limited to those instances in which messages are formulated and delivered "mindfully"; and in particular, about whether "effective communication" is a matter of adhering to the Cooperative Principle (making one's messages sincere, relevant, perspicuous, and sufficient for the need) or in addition involves a Goffman-esque control of the unfolding transaction.

However, an absence of controversy about the central idea can also preserve unexamined assumptions, and in this case has done so. My object here is to explicate a critical assumption in the way we conceive of communicative competence, to dispute that assumption, and to indicate the consequences for method and research objectives of abandoning it.

The critical assumption I am concerned with becomes apparent when our notion of communicative competence is contrasted with the Chomskyan (1957; 1959; 1965) notion of linguistic competence. In opposition to behaviorist (Bloomfieldian) orientations in structural linguistics, Chomsky contended that (a) overt linguistic behavior is not an adequate or primary datum for linguistic theory, and (b) a linguistic theory cannot directly account for overt linguistic behavior. These contentions rest on the postulate that a human language is not a collection of (potential) behaviors--utterances--or

even a set of rules and conventions for producing and understanding such behaviors; that a human language is an abstract system which relates surface (graphic or phonetic) representations of sentences and underlying grammatical forms and semantic interpretations. A linguistic theory is about such abstract systems. However, given that speakers/hearers must "know" such a system to speak/understand the language at all, a linguistic theory is functionally an account of the competence to undertake linguistic behavior.

This results in a meta-theoretical distinction between an account of the competence to undertake the behavior, and accounts of the behavior itself. Specifying the abstract system that a language comprises leaves unexplained how and why speakers/hearers in diverse linguistic environments acquire essentially the same "knowledge" of their language, and yet differ--from each other, and from situation to situation--in how fluent and articulate they are. (The criticisms of Chomsky by Hymes, Searle, and others for failing to give substantial attention to the overt facts of language use are thus oddly misplaced, fully missing the meta-theoretical point.)

We have no obligation to be faithful to Chomsky's terminology (except to avoid confusion), and so it arguably does not matter that our interests under the rubric of "communicative competence" are largely on the "performance" side of a competence/performance distinction. That is, our concern has been with the factors that promote effective communication, in performance, with the factors that enable people to communicate competently--not with what enables people to communicate in the first place, with the competence to undertake communication.

Rather, the interesting difference between us and Chomsky is that we have made no competence/performance distinction whatever (in fact, Wiemann and Backlund, 1980, expressly advocate collapsing that distinction in studies of communication). This is justifiable, but only on certain assumptions. It is these which have been left unexamined, and which I intend to dispute.

To make no distinction between competence and performance obviously presupposes that it would be spurious to do so. There are definitional grounds for viewing the distinction as spurious for communication theory, but they are weak. If we say that a failure to communicate effectively is ipso facto a failure to communicate at all, then accounting for effective communication (performance) is the same as accounting for the enabling cognitions of all communication (competence). However, if we assume that all (most?) people have the cognitions and skills to communicate in some fashion, then equating "effective communication" with "communication per se" mandates that the study of communicative competence focus on the lowest common denominator, the cognitions and skills everyone (most?) have that enables them to communicate to some minimal degree. This rules out a concern with precisely what our interest has been from the outset--namely, those cognitions and skills which some (not all or most) people have that makes them particularly effective. But to go the other way, and distinguish a concern with the ability to communicate at all from a concern with the ability to communicate well, fosters a competence/performance distinction.

A different, stronger case that can be made against a competence/performance distinction in communication theory involves the link be-

tween meaning and communication, and is the principal concern here.

It can easily be supposed that mastery of a shared means of expression--e.g., a language--is both necessary and sufficient to enable communication. In that case, an account of linguistic competence (or the analog for other expression systems) is functionally an account of the competence to undertake communication (as well as the competence to speak/understand sentences of a language). This leaves to communication theory just the problem of accounting for individual differences in communicative performance, in effectiveness--a separate concern with the ability to communicate in the first place would be redundant. This is of course precisely the course we have taken, except for a shift in terminology from Chomskyan usage.

However, it is not the case that knowing rules of language and conventions of utterance is sufficient to enable communication. Such rules and conventions are not sufficient to account either for the specific interpretation of uttered expressions in specific instances, or for the fact that interpretations are fluid (subject to revision over time): in that case, following such rules in formulating messages cannot guarantee that the result will communicate what one intended under the circumstances, or anything at all. This contention is founded on the fact that work on interpretation in linguistics and philosophy (Austin, 1962; Grice, 1957; 1975; Searle, 1969; Kempson, 1977; Gazdar, 1979; Cole, 1981) collectively indicates three distinct types of interpretation which utterances can have. The rules and conventions by which utterances are linked with various possible (types of) interpretation cannot specify also which of those possible interpretations the utterance should (was intended to) receive in the given instance.

I have posited elsewhere (Sanders, 1980, 1981, 1983, forthcoming) that interpreters implicitly have the problem of judging which of an utterance's possible interpretations it should receive in a given instance, and that this judgment is based on (a) which possible interpretation is relevant to, can be integrated into, the on-going text or transaction so as to further its coherence, and (b) which advances the unfolding text or transaction to a new state. Insofar as a communicator fails to take options of content, coding, and means of transmission, relative to the audience, that produce a message which has an interpretation in satisfaction of those conditions, the message cannot be assigned any interpretation at all; insofar as the communicator fails to take options in formulating and delivering the message such that undesired interpretations which can satisfy those conditions are not possible, the message will likely be misinterpreted. (Note, incidentally, that all of this is wholly consistent with Hymes' remarks quoted above.)

This was the point of a contest by New York magazine several years ago for what were called "conversation stoppers"--utterances so out of keeping with the on-going transaction that contributing them would bring the conversation to a stop. The magazine gave something like (1) as an example, and (2)-(4) are in the same vein:

(1) [A person walks up to a group chatting over cocktails at the opening of an art exhibition and says] My brother just got a job with the telephone company.

(2) [A customer says to a department store clerk during a transaction] Your teeth are unusually long and rounded.

(3) [A driver stopped at a red light says to a passing pedestrian] Leon Trotsky was assasinated nearly 56 years ago.

(4) [A student says to a professor during an advising session] Your watch crystal has a crack in it.

(1)-(4) are odd because they are evident non sequiturs, and thus not easily cohered with antecedents in a way that supports any principled judgment about which of their possible interpretations should be assigned in that instance. Of course, it is possible and natural to try imagining connections the speaker might have had in mind to utter those sentences meaningfully, and on that basis one can speculate as to their interpretation. However, the extent to which this is necessary, but involves speculations unrestricted by any antecedently specified universe of discourse, is the extent to which the speaker has lost control of what, or whether, he/she communicates anything at all, let alone something in particular.

There is an obvious resemblance at this point between the foregoing and Grice's idea that interpretations are adjusted as need be to meet the presumption of relevance (and also sincerity, sufficiency, and perspicuity). But there is a fundamental difference between Grice's analysis and what I am getting at here.

By starting with the distinction between "natural" and "non-natural" meanings, Grice (1957) construed the interpretive problem as a binary one, an either/or choice between the utterance's propositional content and an implicated proposition. Given a unitary notion of relevance, essentially having to do with commonalities in the (overt or implicated) proposition and antecedent information (but see Dascal, 1977), the logic involved is that an uttered expression

has its "natural" meaning if that is relevant (and sincere, sufficient, and perspicuously stated), and a "non-natural" meaning otherwise.

However, Grice is mistaken to consider that either the propositional content of an utterance is "accepted," or an implicature is derived instead. Even if one or another of the conversational maxims are breached, and an implicature derived, it may nonetheless happen that the propositional content of the uttered expression is more important in the on-going transaction (e.g., if one considers an utterance insufficiently informative, one may nonetheless have more reason to focus on and respond to whatever information it does provide, than the implicated conditions that explain away its insufficiency). This holds even when an utterance breaches the maxim of relation, when its propositional content is "irrelevant": that does not necessarily rule out that the propositional content contributes more to the transaction than the implicature, given that when an utterance is "irrelevant" at face value, the implicated proposition supplements rather than displaces the offending propositional content so as to establish its relevance.

But Grice is not only mistaken to suggest that his analysis accounts for the specific choice of an interpretation; he is also mistaken to represent the problem in terms of a binary choice. An utterance can also have a third type of interpretation, as an illocutionary act, that does not compete in the abstract with the other two types of interpretation. Thus, H's response in (5) breaches the maxim of relation and implicates H's disbelief that there are any nearby gas stations: but the interpreter can optionally focus on that implicature (S_1's response), or on the propositional content

of the "irrelevant" propositional content (S_2's response), or on the illocutionary act which H's utterance could count as (S_3's response):

(5) S: I've run out of gas.

H: There's a phone booth a block or two back.

S_1: No, you haven't noticed where we are; there's a gas station just ahead, around the bend.

S_2: Are you sure? I didn't see anything back there.

S_3: Who put you in charge? Spending my money for me on a service call.

The obvious question, then, is how to distinguish Grice's notion of "relevance" from the notion of "relevance" employed here to analyze the way specific interpretations come to be preferred over competing alternatives on the grounds that they fit into, cohere, the discourse.

Grice (1975: 46) explicates the maxim of relation somewhat tautologously as the imperative "be relevant," and goes on to admit some distress about being unable to be clearer about the different types of relevance there are and how they might figure in a talk exchange. Dascal (1977) thus refers back to the Cooperative Principle itself for an indication of what "relevance" means ("Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged"): Dascal's conclusion from this is that an utterance is relevant insofar as its propositional content is responsive to the "conversational demand" (transactional goals?) at that juncture; he then goes on to recognize "layers of

meaning" (roughly analogous to the three types of interpretation here), and to posit that an utterance is increasingly relevant the extent to which layers of meaning over and above propositional content are responsive to "conversational demand" as well. However, without denying that Dascal proceeded reasonably given an intention to make explicit the notion of relevance, he ended up creating a monolith too powerful for Grice's purposes and too undifferentiated for the need here. For Grice, the question is only whether the propositional content is relevant (not whether the utterance is relevant); for the purposes here, the question is what relevance consists of for each of those "layers of meaning" (e.g., acts are relevant by a different measure than propositions are), and what the interpretive consequences are of being relevant in one possible way instead of another.

Given Grice's (1975: 47) notion that the goal in speaking is the exchange of information, and given his examples, it is reasonably clear that what he had in mind under the maxim of relation is that one presumes that the propositional content of an utterance will specify features of a state of affairs that falls within the (conceptual) parameters of the topic antecedently established, and that when it does not do so--is not topically relevant--some further proposition is implicated. But whether or not an utterance is relevant to the topic does not have any bearing on whether it is relevant to the transaction. A text or dialogue which constitutes some transaction resembles a closely reasoned argument that proceeds through a series of interlocking steps from some familiar beginning point to a novel resolution. An utterance is relevant to such a whole insofar as the interpretation by which it is connected to its

antecedent (and consequent) is an interpretation which contributes to the progression of the parts towards some resolution. Utterances which are topically relevant may fail to do this, and vice versa:

(6) S: Have you ever used Fujicolor film?
H: I don't own a Japanese camera.
S: Right; but have you ever used Fujicolor film?
H: I've never even been to Japan.
S: I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me whether Fuji film has decent color quality.
H: I do own a German camera, though.

Consider then that there are interpretive constraints which communicators must take into account, over and above rules of language and conventions of utterance, in order to communicate at all with respect to unfolding texts or transactions, let alone to communicate something in particular (no matter how inconsequential the message is).

Setting aside for now the fact that communicators are not always mindful or strategic, these interpretive constraints mean that communicators may sometimes be faced with trade-offs between what they want to say or do, and what the interpretive consequences will be. Numerous options at each juncture of a transaction involve a serious risk of (a) being interpreted in a way that could adversely affect the course of what follows, (b) being misinterpreted, or (c) being so difficult to interpret that one's competence is called into question. This overturns a number of common sense ideas: the means of

communication are not neutral or unrestrictive; the goal in paring down one's options is only sometimes to communicate what one wants to, and is oftentimes to maximize gains (or minimize losses) relative to what is possible under the circumstances; and communication misfires can occur as a function of the way that the transaction collaboratively unfolds, even if the individual communicators make no coding or transmission errors and are trying to cooperate with each other.

The analysis here makes communicating in a transaction roughly analogous to collaborating with others in the composition of a sentence, but with each participant limited to adding one word at a time, and having to take turns with the other(s). At each juncture, the participant whose turn it is has to decide which word among numerous options to insert. The option taken would have to depend first of all on what can be inserted at that point without violating sequencing restrictions (syntactic and semantic constraints), but it would also depend on what the individual wants the sentence as a whole to mean (or not mean) and whether that involves trade-offs with options that are somehow attractive in their own right. The option taken also depends on whether other participants have opposing ideas of what the sentence should mean: such conflict entails competition for "control" of critical transition boundaries on the basis of the way phrases and clauses are developed. At a given juncture, one or more participants may deem it impossible to "grammatically" complete the sentence as intended, and thus either subvert the collaboration or adopt new goals (whether shared or conflicting), with a new goal being one that it is deemed can be "grammatically"

reached from that juncture, given what has already transpired.

From this perspective, there is no difference between communicating to obtain a response or to make one: it is the same intellectual problem in either case--to move the transaction towards (or away from) specific outcomes. The effect of a message is thus only indirectly what others in the transaction subsequently say or do; the direct effect is to constrain the options of what can meaningfully follow (or what meanings subsequent utterances and behaviors can have). When the participants in a transaction have shared goals, this means that their respective contributions will narrow the options of what can follow in the direction of the same outcome. However, when communicators are at cross purposes, the efforts of one to narrow the options of what can follow towards a certain outcome will be persistently undermined by the contributions of others, thus effecting constant transformations in the nature of the transaction. This can take on a surrealistic aspect, like playing chess on a board that changes its contours and boundaries, with pieces that appear or disappear or change in power, as the result of each player's moves. If the participants in a transaction are not minimally committed to its success, they will be caught up like characters in an absurdist drama, intent on playing a game that is not only impossible to win, but cannot even get underway in any serious sense (e.g., witness the insistence of psychotherapists that before treatment begins, their patients admit to having a problem and needing help). Lewis (1979) has indicated that there is great potential for such fluidity even in what seem like inherent features of sentence meaning.

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Of course, while in principle a communicator has every option open at each juncture, there are practical barriers in most situations to many of them: the problem then faced by communicators is to juggle the options remaining open against those which are closed before the fact, to produce messages that at minimum will not likely be interpreted in an undesired way (if not ones likely to be interpreted in a desired way), and that at minimum constrain what can happen subsequently away from undesired outcomes (if not towards desired ones).

Obviously, this way of characterizing the communication problems of individuals in conversation generalizes to other situations and other formats. It is only what the practical barriers are (if any) to exercising options that distinguishes between communication problems in interpersonal relationships, in the work of groups and organizations, in management and marketing, in law, politics, government, social development, international relations, and so on. Thus, for example, the problem for the Reagan campaign in the 1980 presidential contest with Carter was not so much who to communicate with or through what media--those options were narrowed by simple practicalities: the key problem was what to communicate about Reagan and/or Carter, and how to code it, to achieve the objective of polarizing the differences between the candidates without risking a boomerang. The "information" decided on was about leadership, and that in turn made the coding problem one of contrasting the candidates along that dimension (principally in 30 second TV spots and clips from speeches shown on the news) without making it possible to characterize Reagan as authoritarian and anti-democratic. The problem was reasonably well solved, considering that Carter's sub-

sequent efforts to attack Reagan in that way boomeranged, and were interpreted as exaggerated and desperate reactions.

Communicators are able to calculate estimates of their best options (given their situation and objectives) insofar as they can reliably project what interpretation a contemplated message will (probably) receive at that juncture, and what constraining effect that message, so interpreted, will have. The rules of language and conventions of use, and standardized meanings of nonverbals, are inadequate for the purpose: they are non-exclusive and thus do not enable the projection of most likely single interpretations; and they are too powerful, specifying interpretations an utterance or behavior necessarily has given a fixed set of initial conditions. Hence, there must in addition be principles in general use on which people base decisions as to the single "best" interpretation of a message at a given juncture, relative to what has taken place antecedently. In addition to accounting for how communicators can project what single interpretation a message will be assigned, and what effect its inclusion in the transaction will have on the interpretive consequences of exercising certain options subsequently, the appeal of these interpretive principles is that their level of power is appropriate: rather than entailing that some interpretation is necessary, they only warrant preferences among alternative ways of interpreting messages; and rather than linking such preferences to a fixed set of conditions in the situation or the message, they link them to the specific way a transaction has unfolded up to the juncture at which the message occurs (or at which it is interpreted if that comes later). Finally, such interpretive principles entail

and thus explain that projections of how a message will be interpreted, and constrain the subsequent course of the transaction, are fluid and probabalistic.

Accordingly, an account of the production, interpretation, and response to messages based on cognitive schemata that derive estimations of the best options at a given juncture must have these interpretive principles as its central component. The "predictions" of such an account will not comprise statements that some specific event will occur under certain initial conditions: they will comprise a rank-ordering, or perhaps relative probabilities, of the options practically open to a communicator at a given juncture, relative to their value in minimizing the chances of an undesired consequence (if not maximizing the chances of a desired consequence).

All of this points toward the need to distinguish an account of the competence to communicate from an account of the factors that facilitate effective communication. The concern on the one hand is the abstract system (centered on interpretive constraints) which connects specific interpretations with certain combinations of options in formulating and delivering messages relative to specific junctures in texts and transactions: an account of such a system is functionally an account of the ability to communicate, of the ability to utilize means of expression to say or do things that will have the intended interpretation.

But an account of the basis for controlling one's meanings is clearly not enough to account for the fact that individuals differ from each other, and from one situation to another, in their effectiveness. In terms of the foregoing analysis, effectiveness depends on being able to work out what one's message should mean (or should

(not mean) so as to place constraints on the interpretations of what comes next that will make certain next messages particularly salient and attractive, or unattractive, and thus more or less probable. The paradigm case is when children "blackmail" their parents by framing a request for something in a way that makes any refusal interpretable as punitive, uncaring, or repressive. The ability to work out messages (take options of content, coding, and means of transmission relative to an audience) that have goal-relevant constraining effects likely depends minimally on the following: (a) the "accurate" projection of the interpretive consequences of a contemplated message; (b) the "accurate" interpretation of messages by the audience, especially ones indicative of their traits and dispositions, sufficient to enable a prediction of idiosyncracies of interpretation and response; and (c) a cognitive distinction between intrinsically valued messages (because what they express is "right" or "true") and instrumentally valued messages (because they have requisite constraining effects), and the subordination of the former to the latter when there is a conflict. Note that all three of those prerequisites for the formulation and delivery of effective communication involve certain perceptual skills and disciplines along the lines that have already been of interest in work done under the rubric of "communicative competence," but that the first two at least involve the application of such skills and disciplines to the utilization of an abstract system, and this is what we have tended to overlook.

Given the general characteristics of the abstract system which I have thus far posited, a better precedent than Chomskyan linguistics for the sort of distinction between competence and performance that

we should make is provided by work on decision making. Decision making is viewed as founded on abstract models which structure the relationship between taking different combinations of options and the probability of certain outcomes; however, it is also recognized that the practice of decision-makers often deviates from what such abstract models would predict, either because people have limited information processing capabilities, people seek adequate rather than optimal solutions, or people generally make decisions collaboratively and have to negotiate differing "models" of the problem and differing goals (e.g., Radford, 1977).

But whether linguistics or work on decision making is taken as precedent, the salutary effect of a competence/performance distinction is undeniable (insofar as making one is necessary). Given that in every case, the object of research is to account for individual differences in ability to effectively perform, but that performance is always organized around the application of some abstract system (a grammar, a decision model, interpretive constraints), then effective performance is a matter of more or less ability to apply such an abstract system. The study of performance must therefore be organized around what has been revealed about those basic abstract systems in studies of competence. Our failure to do that so far means that our efforts to understand what enables some people to more effectively communicate than others are scattered and unfocused, as indeed they are. Making a competence/performance distinction in communication theory will thus do nothing to displace our established interests and past work (other than to re-label most of it as work on communicative performance), but will instead supplement and cohere it.

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